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ABSTRACT

Unrecognized learning disabilities in adulthood can also be viewed as concepts fundamental to change. These disabilities may include: (1) not being able to make appropriate choices and decisions; (2) not utilizing strategies such as checking things out with people, and monitoring one's own performance; (3) not being able to transfer learning from one activity to the next; (4) not being able to break tasks into small parts; and (5) not choosing a successful work context. These unrecognized learning disabilities in young adulthood may interfere with the primary life tasks of adults such as choosing and beginning employment, marriage, and family support. Building on previous childhood difficulties with learning to read, write, spell, do arithmetic, or other school subjects only compounds these disabilities. The best definition for a person with learning disabilities, once he or she moves out of school and into adulthood, is a person who cannot change his or her behavior through experience despite an average or better intelligence. The unrecognized learning disabilities in adulthood can be translated into instructional sequences fundamental to change and success. Instructional programs which address transfer, decisionmaking, and task analysis could be made a part of experimental work settings such as at continuing education centers and community programs. (Author/CL)

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UNRECOGNIZED LEARNING DISABILITIES IN ADULTHOOD: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The unrecognized learning disabilities in adulthood can also be viewed as concepts fundamental to change. These disabilities may include: (1) not being able to make appropriate choices and decisions; (2) not utilizing strategies such as checking things out with people, and monitoring one's own performance; (3) not being able to transfer learning from one activity to the next; (4) not being able to break tasks into small parts; and (5) not choosing a successful work context. These unrecognized learning disabilities in young adulthood may interfere with the primary life tasks of adults such as choosing and beginning employment, marriage, and family support. Building on previous childhood difficulties with learning to read, write, spell, do arithmetic, or other school subjects only compounds these disabilities. The best definition for a person with learning disabilities, once he or she moves out of school and into adulthood, is one who cannot change his or her behavior through experience despite an average or better intelligence. The unrecognized learning disabilities in adulthood can be translated into instructional sequences fundamental to change and success. These programs could be made a part of experiemental work settings such as at continuing education centers and community programs, so that no person fails who wants to change his behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

The unrecognized learning disabilities in adulthood can also be viewed as concepts fundamental to change. These disabilities may include: (1) not being able to make appropriate choices and decisions; (2) not utilizing strategies such as checking things out with people, and monitoring one's own performance; (3) not being able to transfer learning from one activity to the next; (4) not being able to break tasks into small parts; and (5) not choosing a successful work context. These unrecognized learning disabilities in young adulthood may interfere with the primary life tasks of adults such as choosing and beginning employment, marriage, and family support. Building on previous childhood difficulties with learning to read, write, spell, do arithmetic, or other school subjects only compounds these disabilities. Instructional sequences for children with learning disabilities tyically focus on the aforementioned presenting problem areas since it is the job of children to go to school and master reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic behaviors. Therefore, it is assumed that when a young person has reached adulthood he or she will be ready to perform adult tasks. Success as an adult is often presupposed by success during the school years. For children with learning disabilities who have struggled to acquire even the most basic school skills these assumptions cannot be made. Because of this, perhaps the best definition for a person with learning disabilities, once he or she moves out of school and into adulthood, is one who cannot change his

or her behavior through experience despite an average or better intelligence. It is to the learning disabled adult's advantage that there is a contemporary recognition that development is neither complete nor fixed by simply having one's twenty-first birthday. In fact, an individual's most significant development stages may yet lie before him or her in the form of vocational and career choices, adjustment to marriage, parenting, and even the final stage of human development, dealing with ones own as well as others mortality. When one considers this long view of development, it is not difficult to see how learning disabilities in adulthood can negatively impact the overwhelming demands that relationships and jobs may place on persons who cannot change their behaviors through experience and who have throughtout their lives experienced difficulties making choices and decisions, utilizing strategies, transferring learning from one activity to the next, and structuring tasks in a successful work context.

EVERY YEAR - 120,000 LEARNING DISABLED ADULTS

According to the 1977 Bureau of Census, there are 16,000,000 young persons enrolled in our nation's high schools. A minimum of 3% of this population are designated as young adults with learning disabilities. This means that every year at least 120,000 learning disabled adults drop out or "graduate" from our high schools. For most of these former students, there is literally no place to go and little or nothing for them to do because most work stations expect "employees" to be ready

to produce productive behaviors with minimal orientation and training. This view is in sharp contrast to the often publicized profiles of great men who were learning disabled, but went on to make significant contributions during their lifetimes. Numbered among these are: Leonardo di Vinci, George S. Patton, Thomas Edison, Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Hans Christian Anderson, Agusute Rodin and Albert Einstein. As children, all of these great men were variously described as "ineducable", "dull", and "backward". As adults they all went on to make significant contributions within the context of their individual strengths. Perhaps it could be said that these eight persons also have in common that they are unlike the many hundreds of thousands of young adults with learning disabilities who struggle on a day to day basis to keep their jobs and their personal relationships from coming apart and when in all likelihood will never receive any notoriety for their dilemma. In our contemporary society it is even possible that many persons with diagnosed psychiatric disorders may have as a contributing characteristic unrecognized learning disabilities.

Certainly there are individual victories that while receiving far less notoriety than the likes of Wilson, Churchill, and Einstein, are no less important for the positive prognosis of each individual who wants to be productive, but who literally cannot change his behavior through experience. The most obvious implicaiton for adults with learning disabilities who find themselves not being able to hold a job or not being able to acquire the

skills necessary to even secure employment is teaching, which is defined as changing behavior. This teaching must take place at the work station and at continuing education centers within our communities. Once a young adult has graduated from formal educational opportunities and experiences first hand the difficulties of "making it" in society, even in terms of the most basic wants and needs such as owning a car, buying food, renting an apartment or maintaining relationships, the motivation to succeed becomes intense as well as intrinsic. However, as most learning disabled young persons and adults soon discover, while they now have motivation and are available to learning, there are few persons available to teach them, and try as they might on their own, they more often than not fail to change their behavior.

CHANGE

The unrecognized learning disabilities in adulthood can be translated into instructional sequences fundamental to change and success. These programs could be made a part of experiemental work settings such as at continuing education centers and community programs, so that no person fails who wants to change his behaviors.

Making Choices and Decisions.

The concerns for young adults with learning disabilities is not simply just making choices and decisions, but rather viewing this as an active process where individuals can make choices and decisions that are in their own best interest. Many young adults with learning disabilities, particularly those who are having trouble controlling their tempers or who seem

at odds with authority figures such as the "shop foreman" need to be told that it is okay to have angry feelings and feel like quitting the job without actually putting into action what they are thinking. It is also imperative to teach young adults with learning disabilities that if someone calls and says, "Let's go out drinking", the learning disabled adult can choose to say "No, thank you, my boss wants me to operate a piece of machinery tomorrow". Instruction to young people and adults with learning disabilities would have to include pat phrases to be rehearsed, practiced and overlearned in a role playing situation so that these words can come easily enough to facilitate the decision making process when this type of situation must inevitably arise. Suggestibility in childhood, even though it may involve throwing rocks, is one thing, but when one considers the magnitude of inappropriate choices with which young adults and adults are confronted today including the use and abuse of alcohol and drugs, then it is easy to see that some active strategy must be employed. This includes learning to say, "No thank you".

Utilizing Strategies.

Children with learning disabilities often do not have friends on the playground to play with simply because they do not know how to go up to a group of other children and say, "Hi, guys! What's happening," or "Hey, can I play." As an adult with learning disabilities, it is no longer a matter of asking other children to play, it is walking into an employment office or a company and being handed a long, complicated, application form and either

turning around and walking out the door because it looks too difficult or even worse, sitting down and filling it out on the spot complete with misspelled words, as well as capitalization and punctuation miscues that would preclude the young adult with learning disabilities from ever getting a change to get beyond the receptionist's desk. The types of strategies that are being recommended for a young person in this situation would include taking the application form to a parent, trusted teacher, friend, or perhaps even a continuing education or adult center in the community to receive help. Most of these forms are handed out by clerical staff within the companies and the young adult with learning disabilities can learn to simply tell the clerk, "I am late for another appointment and I will bring this back as soon as I have filled it out." This is NOT stretching the truth, it is enlightened self-interest and as a strategy, it may allow the young person to at least get a chance to talk with someone who will agree to evaluate him on his performance in the work setting rather than on his spelling, capitalization, or punctuation miscues. Strategies for working through on-the job reading assignments, would include having a friend read the material into a tape recorder so that it can be listened to rather than having to deal with word calling per se, reviewing questions to be answered before reading or listening to the tape so that the young adult with learning disabilities would have a specific reason for reading or listening. Community and adult education centers could also be instrumental in helping

work stations produce filmstrips and videotapes or slide presentations of a sequence of events which could be overlearned and mastered by the learning disabled adult viewing them over and over again as appropriate. Perhaps the most significant strategy for helping young adults with learning disabilities to be successful, is to help them see the connection between their own experiences, thoughts, feelings and ideas and the job they are being asked to perform by asking self instructional questions such as, "Did what I read, hear, or view make sense to me?". It is through this process that the young adult with learning disabilities can learn to ask for support rather than remaining silent only to fail and receive criticism.

Transferring Learning

It is within the context of transferring learning from skill acquisition to skill application that technologies could play the greatest role. The most basic of these, the tape recorder and the small hand held or even wrist calculator could be the greatest single aids for young adults with learning disabilities. These tools are the great equalizer in the sense that they facilitate a sharing of ideas and for example, the calculator virtually eliminates the difficulty with basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division facts and emphasizes application whether it is balancing a check book, shopping, or figuring out how many gallons of fuel a tank will hold. Within the next decade small computers that are now available commercially at radio stores will be in places in homes in American and training

activities will emphasize the importance of being able to think well and problem solve by virtually eliminating the detail work of most mathematical activities. Many public schools have already begun programs that emphasize the acquistion of these computer skills and it is, therefore, imperative that curriculum shift from simple skill acquisition to problem solving and utilizing the fullest potentials of young persons with learning disabilities so that when they become adults they can function in our society using these technologies. Perhaps the most striking example of this concern is found in our new automotive technologies where in order to diagnose a car's problem the technician plugs in the computer to a dashboard receptacle or under the hood outlet and then reads the diagnostic profile on the monitor which then refers him to a manual to remove and replace parts rather than repair them as has been the case with our older automobiles. This procedure makes much of the technicalities of auto mechanics obsolete particularly in its detailed study of vocabulary and electrical circuitry as parts today on cars can literally not be repaired but must be simply replaced with a new part which would not require a detailed understanding of internal function for all but a few specialists. For adults with learning disabilities we are interested in jobs and producing competent generalist behaviors.

Breaking Tasks Into Small Steps and Working in a Successful Context

Despite the overwhelming feelings of failure and genuine desire to please and get a job done, once again we are confronted

with an adult who cannot change his behavior through experiences. In order to help learning disabled adults to succeed on job tasks the structures of what to do first, next, and last as well as the basic skills for outlining should be presented for all learning. Tasks for outlining should be presented for all instructional sequences. This form of structure will not only help a learning disabled adult move through tasks but if structured appropriately will allow for further task analysis which leads directly to specific criterion referenced activities and the ultimate process of positively reinforcing success on a task where there was initially confusion and fear of failure. Even a simple technique such as asking yourself, "What am I going to do first, what will I do next, and what will I do last, " in terms of organizing and planning activities will result in some positive behavior improvement. This self-monitoring device will at least allow the learning disabled adult to make the important decision about whether to proceed because the skills are available, or ask for help in a specific area and receive support rather than being overwhelmed by the complete task, which more often than not results in inactivitiy on the part of the adult with learning disabilities. This inactivity is usually referred to as a lack of motivation when in fact it is not that at all but rather a skill deficit basic to beginning a task, deciding what the steps are, and then being able to produce those behaviors. Working in steps on an hour to hour, day by day basis also provides the learning disabled adult with

routine and predictability in events such as meals and other chores and personal needs. Without these guideposts for daily living many persons with learning disabilities become anxious and often these anxieties are translated into inappropriate motor behavior or hyperactivity. As with most younger persons these problems can be eliminated with planning in small steps and by recording for reference what to do first, next, and last, perhaps on a chart kept in a personal place.

FINAL THOUGHT

There will be fewer unsuccessful adults with learning disabilities if we can work in our homes, schools, and communities towards understanding that it is the final product of human development, the productive adult that we should be most concerned with and herein lies our greatest challenges, not only for children who will become adults with learning disabilities, but all learners as well.

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